

Americans’ Knowledge of the U.S. Supreme Court: Pre-Analysis Plan

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Recent research suggests that political scientists have understated popular knowledge of the U.S. Supreme Court. This research implies that popular knowledge of other aspects of government has been understated as well. The implication may be correct. But these revisionist studies of political knowledge may err in the other direction, by overstating popular knowledge of politics. Focusing on the Supreme Court, we will use an experiment conducted with a representative national sample to test the idea that inferences about popular knowledge of politics depend heavily on little-appreciated aspects of survey design and analysis.

Experimental Manipulations

We will field a survey on a national sample of U.S. adults. Most of the questions in the survey will be factual questions about the U.S. Supreme Court.

The study will include two main types of manipulation. One is a number-of-response options manipulation: for a given question, subjects will be randomly assigned to see three or five response options (in addition to “don’t know”). When subjects are assigned to see only three options, the two incorrect options that they see will be drawn at random from the complete set of four incorrect options. Subjects who are instead assigned to the five-response-option condition will simply see the correct response and the four alternatives, presented in random order.

For some questions, some subjects will be assigned to an open-ended condition. These subjects will see no response options at all; instead, they will see an open-ended version of the question.

The second type of manipulation involves the difficulty of response options. For a given question, subjects will be randomly assigned to see a “difficult” or an “easy” set

of response options; a “difficult” set is one that we expect will make it more difficult to identify the correct option.

Twelve of our questions involve a number-of-response-options manipulation. Six involve a difficulty-of-response-options manipulation. All six questions that involve a difficulty manipulation also involve a number-of-response-options manipulation and an open-ended condition. There are thus five conditions for each of these six questions: three easy options, five easy options, three hard options, five hard options, and an open-ended condition.¹

Random assignments will be done at the question-subject level. For example, a subject who is assigned to the easy three-option condition for one question may be assigned to the difficult five-option condition for another question, and to the open-ended condition for a third question.

Hypotheses

1. Correct-response rates are decreasing in the number of response options.
2. Correct-response rates are decreasing in the difficulty of response options.
3. The difference between correct-response rates to questions that have a short-easy set of response options and questions that have a long-difficult set of response options will be greater than, or equal to, the difference between correct-response rates to questions that have a long-difficult set of response options and the corresponding open-ended questions.

We refer to Hypothesis 3 as our “main hypothesis.”

¹ We will also include a set of “extremely easy” response options to one question. See the questionnaire at the end of this document for details.

Estimation

To test Hypothesis 1, we will pool responses to all of the questions in which we manipulate the number of response options. We will use the pooled data to estimate two models:

$$correct_{ij} = \alpha + \beta_1(\text{five response options})_{ij} + \lambda_j + \epsilon_{it}, \text{ and} \quad (1a)$$

$$correct_{ij} = \alpha + \beta_1(\text{five response options})_{ij} + \lambda_j + \gamma\mathbf{X}_{it} + \epsilon_{it}, \quad (1b)$$

where i indexes subjects, j indexes questions, and $correct_{ij}$ equals 1 if subject i answered question j correctly, 0 otherwise. λ_j is a vector of fixed effects for each question, and \mathbf{X}_{it} is a vector of control variables: age, age², educational attainment, gender, an index of general political knowledge (measured prior to treatment), party ID, race, and state of residence. We will not causally interpret these covariates; we will include them only to improve the precision of the estimates of β_1 .

Our procedure for the testing of Hypothesis 2 is much the same. We will pool responses to the all of the questions in which we manipulate response-option difficulty. We will use the pooled data to estimate two models:

$$correct_{ij} = \alpha + \beta_1\text{difficult}_{ij} + \lambda_j + \epsilon_{it}, \text{ and} \quad (2a)$$

$$correct_{ij} = \alpha + \beta_1\text{difficult}_{ij} + \lambda_j + \gamma\mathbf{X}_{it} + \epsilon_{it}, \quad (2b)$$

where difficult_{ij} indicates whether subject i was assigned to the “difficult response options” condition for question j . The other variables are as described above.

Our main hypothesis is a difference of differences. To estimate it, we will pool data from the six questions for which we manipulate both the number and the

difficulty of response options. As the hypothesis is about correct-response rates in three conditions—“three easy response options,” “five hard response options,” and the open-ended condition—we will exclude data from other conditions. We will estimate two models:

$$correct_{ij} = \alpha + \beta_1(three\ easy)_{ij} + \beta_2(five\ difficult)_{ij} + \lambda_j + \epsilon_{it}, \text{ and} \quad (3a)$$

$$correct_{ij} = \alpha + \beta_1(three\ easy)_{ij} + \beta_2(five\ difficult)_{ij} + \lambda_j + \gamma\mathbf{X}_{it} + \epsilon_{it}, \quad (3b)$$

where $(three\ easy)_{ij} + (five\ difficult)_{ij}$ indicate the condition to which subject i was assigned for question j . The reference category is the open-ended condition. The test of the hypothesis is $(\beta_1 - \beta_2) > \beta_2 \Leftrightarrow \beta_1 - 2\beta_2 > 0$.

Statistical Power and Allocation of Subjects

In an analysis that follows the form of Equation 3a, pilot-test data suggest that $\alpha = .50$ and $\beta_2 = .17$. Suppose that the difference between correct-response rates to questions that have a short-easy set of response options and questions that have a long-difficult set of response options is 30% greater than the difference between correct-response rates to questions that have a long-difficult set of response options and the corresponding open-ended questions. We therefore have $\beta_1 = 2.3(\beta_2) = .391$. Our simulations suggest that, under these conditions, we will detect $\beta_1 - 2\beta_2 > 0$ at $p < .05$ (one-tailed) in approximately 80% of experiments that have 467 subjects in each of the “three easy,” “five difficult,” and open-ended conditions.

We will collect data from approximately 2,000 subjects. For most questions in which we manipulate both the difficulty and the number of response options, we will use this allocation schedule: approximately 536 subjects in the “three-easy” and

“five-difficult” conditions, 500 subjects in the open-ended condition, and 214 in the “three-difficult” and “five-easy” conditions.

One of our questions includes an “extremely easy” closed-ended condition. For this question, we will use a slightly different allocation schedule: approximately 500 subjects in the “three-easy,” “five-difficult,” and open-ended conditions; approximately 200 in the “three-difficult” and “five-easy” conditions; and approximately 100 in the extremely easy condition.

Measurement and Coding of Covariates

The last pages of the appended questionnaire include the questions that we will use to measure each covariate.

Education. We will treat the educational attainment of our subjects as a categorical variable. That is, the regressions that include covariates will include indicators for every level of education (“12th grade, diploma,” “12th grade, no GED or diploma,” and so on), save for a reference category.

Gender. Our question about the gender of our subjects is open-ended. We will use the responses to this question to create an indicator for “female”; this is the gender covariate that we will include when we control for covariates.

Political knowledge (general). Our survey will include three general political knowledge questions, all asked before any treatment assignments are conducted. We will create one indicator for each variable (1 = correct response; 0 = incorrect response, “don’t know,” or skipped question) and will control for all of these variables when we estimate models 1b, 2b, and 3b. We will not control for an index of political knowledge when we estimate those models.

Race. Our question about the race of our subjects is open-ended. We will use the responses to this question to create six race indicators: “Asian,” “black,” “Hispanic or Latino,” “multiracial,” “white,” and “other race.” We will control for five of these six indicators; the sixth will be our reference category.

Screening and Elimination of Subjects

Commitment screener. Following Clifford and Jerit (2016), we will ask subjects to commit to not looking up answers online. We will make this request at the start of the survey, and we will omit from our analyses all subjects who do not make the commitment. In our previous research, fewer than 1% of subjects refused to make the commitment.

Placebo question. As in Bullock et al. (2015), our survey will contain a “placebo question.” The question is about an obscure historical figure; the answer is known to almost no one, but it is trivial to discover if one uses Google or other online search tools. We will use this question as a measure of the extent to which subjects use online tools to look up the answers to our other questions. But we will not exclude subjects who answer the question correctly from our analyses.

Attention screeners. Following Berinsky, Margolis, and Sances (2014), we will use two “attention screeners” to gauge whether respondents are attending to our questions. We will not exclude subjects who fail these screeners from our analyses.

Break-offs. Following the AAPOR Standard Definitions (for Public Opinion Research 2016, 14-15), we define break-offs as interviews with subjects who answered fewer than half of our questions. We will eliminate all break-offs from our analyses.

Missing Covariate Values

Some of our models call for use of the battery of covariates described in the “Estimation” section. To ensure that all models are estimated with data from the same set of subjects, we will estimate models with data from only those subjects who provide information (e.g., demographic information) for all of the covariates listed above.

Implausible age data. Age will be computed from answers to our question about year of birth. Answers indicating age less than 18 or greater than 100 (e.g., year of birth of 1874 or 22222) will be treated as missing data.

Checks for Covariate Imbalance

We will regress an indicator for each treatment on the covariates described in the “Estimation” section. For each regression, the F statistic will be our gauge of covariate imbalance (Gerber and Green 2012, 107). F -statistic p-values of less than 0.01 will prompt a review of the random assignment procedures and possible data-handling mistakes. If we find no errors, we will report the imbalance, proceed on the assumption that it is due to chance, and report estimates with and without covariate adjustment.

References

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- Gerber, Alan S., and Donald P. Green. 2012. *Field Experiments: Design, Analysis, and Interpretation*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Knowledge of the U.S. Supreme Court: Questionnaire

Have you had any time to pay attention to what the U.S. Supreme Court has been doing in the past few years?

- No
- Yes

Display This Question:

If Have you had any time to pay attention to what the U.S. Supreme Court has been doing in the past few years? Yes Is Selected

In the last few years, has the Court done anything that you have liked? If so, what?

Display This Question:

If Have you had any time to pay attention to what the U.S. Supreme Court has been doing in the past few years? Yes Is Selected

In the last few years, has the Court done anything that you have disliked? If so, what?

Instructions Most of the questions to follow are about the U.S. Supreme Court. It is important to us that you do not use outside sources like the Internet to search for the correct answers. We are trying to understand what people know about politics, not what they can look up. Do you agree to answer the following questions without help from outside sources?

- Yes
- No

What job or political office does Mike Pence hold?

What job or political office does Janet Yellen hold?

- Chair of the Federal Reserve System
- U.S. Attorney General
- Secretary of Labor
- Don't know

How long is the term of a U.S. Senator?

- 2 years
- 4 years
- 6 years
- 8 years
- 10 years
- Don't know

People have different trusted news sources. People also differ in how carefully they read survey questions. To show that you've read carefully, please ignore the question below and do not select any of the choices. Just move to the next page. What is your most trusted source of news?

- New York Times
- Huffington Post
- CNN
- Fox News
- MSNBC
- ABC News
- CBS News
- Other

How many justices currently serve on the Supreme Court?

- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 12
- Don't know

How many justices currently serve on the Supreme Court?

- 4
- 8
- 16
- 21
- 50
- Don't know

How many justices currently serve on the Supreme Court?

How are Supreme Court justices chosen?

- Nominated by the President, then confirmed by the Senate
- Elected by the American people
- Nominated by the President, then confirmed by the justices already on the Court
- Appointed by a bipartisan Congressional committee
- Recommended by the Department of Justice, then approved by the Senate
- Don't know

Is it possible to watch lawyers argue before the Supreme Court?

- No. Lawyers do not argue before the Supreme Court in person. They only submit written arguments.
- No. Lawyers do argue before the Supreme Court in person, but those arguments are private.
- Yes, except for highly sensitive national security cases. In those cases, all proceedings are private.
- Yes, the hearings are televised on C-SPAN.
- Yes, if one goes to Washington, D.C. to see the Court in person.
- Don't know

When there is a conflict over the meaning of the U.S. Constitution, who has the final say?

- Supreme Court
- Congress
- President
- Secretary of State
- Department of Justice
- Don't know

Who is the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court?

- Theodore Olson
- John Roberts
- J. Harvie Wilkinson, III
- Mark Rockefeller
- Homer Stille Cummings
- Don't know

Who is the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court?

- William Rehnquist
- John Roberts
- Clarence Thomas
- Antonin Scalia
- Earl Warren
- Don't know

Who is the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court?

- Abraham Lincoln
- John Roberts
- Genghis Khan
- Taylor Swift
- Oprah Winfrey
- Don't know

Display This Question:

If Questions Easy Who is the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court? Don't know Is Selected

We understand that you don't know the answer. But if you had to choose, which of these options would be your best guess?

- Theodore Olson
- John Roberts
- J. Harvie Wilkinson, III
- Mark Rockefeller
- Homer Stille Cummings

Display This Question:

If Questions Hard Who is the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court? Don't know Is Selected

We understand that you don't know the answer. But if you had to choose, which of these options would be your best guess?

- William Rehnquist
- John Roberts
- Antonin Scalia
- Clarence Thomas
- Earl Warren

Display This Question:

If Who is the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court? Don't know Is Selected

We understand that you don't know the answer. But if you had to choose, which of these options would be your best guess?

- Abraham Lincoln
- John Roberts
- Genghis Khan
- Taylor Swift
- Oprah Winfrey

Who is the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court?

Who is the Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate?

- Elliot Anderson
- Philip Baruth
- James Ohrenschall
- Brian Collamore
- Mitch McConnell
- Don't know

Who is the Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate?

- John Boehner
- Harry Reid
- Chuck Schumer
- Paul Ryan
- Mitch McConnell
- Don't know

Display This Question:

If Questions Easy Who is the Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate? Don't know Is Selected

We understand that you don't know the answer. But if you had to choose, which of these options would be your best guess?

- Elliot Anderson
- Philip Baruth
- James Ohrenschall
- Brian Collamore
- Mitch McConnell

Display This Question:

If Questions Hard Who is the Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate? Don't know Is Selected

We understand that you don't know the answer. But if you had to choose, which of these options would be your best guess?

- Harry Reid
- Paul Ryan
- John Boehner
- Chuck Schumer
- Mitch McConnell

Who is the Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate?

How many justices usually serve on the Supreme Court?

- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 12
- Don't know

How many justices usually serve on the Supreme Court?

- 4
- 9
- 16
- 21
- 50
- Don't know

How many justices usually serve on the Supreme Court?

Questions What job or political office did Horatio King hold?

There are currently eight justices on the Supreme Court. If they split 4 to 4 on a ruling in a case, what happens?

- The decision of a lower court stands
- The case is sent to Congress, which must decide it
- The case is sent to the Senate Judiciary Committee, which must decide it
- The Supreme Court must reconsider the case after hearing new arguments from both sides
- The Attorney General must break the tie
- Don't know

How many of the current Supreme Court justices are women?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- Don't know

How many of the current Supreme Court justices are women?

- 0
- 3
- 8
- 9
- 12
- Don't know

How many of the current Supreme Court justices are women?

On which of the following issues has the Supreme Court ruled? (Choose all that apply.)

- The maximum income tax rate that people can be required to pay
- The voting rights of black Americans
- A woman's right to have an abortion
- The amount of the federal minimum wage
- The employment rights of gay and lesbian Americans
- Don't know

Supreme Court Justices' salaries are determined by Congress. The Constitution prohibits Congress from reducing Justices' salaries while the Justices are currently serving. Please choose the "Don't know" option below.

- \$233,000
- \$300,000
- \$412,000
- Don't know

Is Supreme Court justice Elena Kagan generally considered, liberal, moderate, or conservative?

- Liberal
- Moderate
- Conservative
- Don't know

Is Supreme Court justice Samuel Alito generally considered, liberal, moderate, or conservative?

- Liberal
- Moderate
- Conservative
- Don't know

How long is the term of a Supreme Court justice?

- 4 years
- 6 years
- 8 years
- 10 years
- Life term
- Don't know

How long is the term of a Supreme Court justice?

- 1 year
- 2 years
- 3 years
- Until age 60
- Life term
- Don't know

How long is the term of a Supreme Court justice?

Which of these statements best describes the Supreme Court's power?

- It can interpret laws only to settle disputes between two parties in a legal case
- It can give advice on the interpretation of a law at any time, even when no legal case is involved
- It can advise the president on the meaning of a law when he asks for advice
- It can advise the Senate Judiciary Committee on the meaning of a law when it asks for advice
- It can give advice on the interpretation of a law only if the law was passed within the last year
- Don't know

Can Supreme Court justices ever be removed from office?

- Yes, if their fellow justices unanimously agree to impeach them
- Yes, if they are impeached by the House of Representatives and convicted by the Senate
- Yes, if they are too sick or too old to do the job
- Yes, if they are prosecuted by the Attorney General
- No, they can never be removed
- Don't know

The Supreme Court uses juries to decide cases.

- True
- False
- Don't know

Display This Question:

If The Supreme Court uses juries to decide cases. Don't know Is Selected

The Supreme Court uses juries to decide cases. (We understand that you don't know the answer. But if you had to choose, which of these options would be your best guess?)

- True
- False

Supreme Court justices usually make public, in writing, the reasons behind their rulings.

- True
- False
- Don't know

Display This Question:

If Supreme Court justices usually make public, in writing, the reasons behind their rulings.

Don't know Is Selected

Supreme Court justices usually make public, in writing, the reasons behind their rulings. (We understand that you don't know the answer. But if you had to choose, which of these options would be your best guess?)

- True
- False

When citizens are defendants in criminal trials, it is their right to have their cases heard by the Supreme Court.

- True
- False
- Don't know

Display This Question:

If When citizens are defendants in criminal trials, it is their right to have their cases heard by the Supreme Court. Don't know Is Selected

When citizens are defendants in criminal trials, it is their right to have their cases heard by the Supreme Court. (We understand that you don't know the answer. But if you had to choose, which of these options would be your best guess?)

- True
- False

When the Supreme Court rules against someone, that person can appeal the decision to the Federal Courts of Appeals.

- True
- False
- Don't know

Display This Question:

If When the Supreme Court rules against someone, that person can appeal the decision to the Federal Court of Appeals. Don't know Is Selected

When the Supreme Court rules against someone, that person can appeal the decision to the Federal Courts of Appeals. (We understand that you don't know the answer. But if you had to choose, which of these options would be your best guess?)

- True
- False

The Supreme Court has the power to overturn every decision made by a state court.

- True
- False
- Don't know

Display This Question:

If The Supreme Court has the power to overturn every decision made by a state court. Don't know Is Selected

The Supreme Court has the power to overturn every decision made by a state court. (We understand that you don't know the answer. But if you had to choose, which of these options would be your best guess?)

- True
- False

If Congress passes a bill unanimously, and the President signs it into law, the Supreme Court can nullify it by declaring it unconstitutional.

- True
- False
- Don't know

Display This Question:

If If Congress passes a bill unanimously, and the President signs it into law, the Supreme Court can nullify it by declaring it unconstitutional. Don't know Is Selected

If Congress passes a bill unanimously, and the President signs it into law, the Supreme Court can nullify it by declaring it unconstitutional. (We understand that you don't know the answer. But if you had to choose, which of these options would be your best guess?)

- True
- False

The Supreme Court can impeach a member of Congress.

- True
- False
- Don't know

Display This Question:

If The Supreme Court can impeach a member of Congress. Don't know Is Selected

The Supreme Court can impeach a member of Congress. (We understand that you don't know the answer. But if you had to choose, which of these options would be your best guess?)

- True
- False

The Supreme Court can impeach the President.

- True
- False
- Don't know

Display This Question:

If The Supreme Court can impeach the President. Don't know Is Selected

The Supreme Court can impeach the President. (We understand that you don't know the answer. But if you had to choose, which of these options would be your best guess?)

- True
- False

The Supreme Court can order that a person be arrested.

- True
- False
- Don't know

Display This Question:

If The Supreme Court can order that a person be arrested. Don't know Is Selected

The Supreme Court can order that a person be arrested. (We understand that you don't know the answer. But if you had to choose, which of these options would be your best guess?)

- True
- False

End of Knowledge Questions Thank you! We have only a few more questions, and they are not about your knowledge of politics.

Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a...

- Democrat
- Republican
- Member of another party
- Independent or unaffiliated

Display This Question:

If Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a... Democrat Is Selected

Would you call yourself...

- A strong Democrat
- A Democrat

Display This Question:

If Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a... Republican Is Selected

Would you call yourself...

- A strong Republican
- A Republican

Display This Question:

If Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a... Member of another party Is Selected

Or Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a... Independent or unaffiliated Is

Selected

Do you think of yourself as closer to the Democratic Party or the Republican Party?

- Democratic Party
- Republican Party
- Equally close to both

You're almost done. The last questions are on this page.

In what year were you born?

What is your race?

What is your gender?

What is the highest level of schooling that you have completed?

- No formal schooling
- 1st grade
- 2nd grade
- 3rd grade
- 4th grade
- 5th grade
- 6th grade
- 7th grade
- 8th grade
- 9th grade
- 10th grade
- 11th grade
- 12th grade, no GED or diploma
- 12th grade, diploma
- Graduate equivalence degree
- Some college, no degree
- Associate's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Other post-college degree

Where do you live now?

- Alabama
- Alaska
- American Samoa
- Arizona
- Arkansas
- California
- Colorado
- Connecticut
- Delaware
- District of Columbia
- Florida
- Georgia
- Guam
- Hawaii
- Idaho
- Illinois
- Indiana
- Iowa
- Kansas
- Kentucky
- Louisiana
- Maine
- Maryland
- Massachusetts
- Michigan
- Minnesota
- Mississippi
- Missouri
- Montana
- Nebraska
- Nevada
- New Hampshire
- New Jersey
- New Mexico
- New York
- North Carolina
- North Dakota
- Ohio
- Oklahoma
- Oregon
- Northern Mariana Islands
- Pennsylvania
- Rhode Island

- South Carolina
- South Dakota
- Tennessee
- Texas
- Utah
- Vermont
- Virgin Islands
- Virginia
- Washington
- West Virginia
- Wisconsin
- Wyoming

Thank you! Thank you for taking this survey. If you would like to leave comments, please feel free to enter them here: